The Comparative Study of Utopias

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ABSTRACT

This paper places the study of utopian thought in a comparative sociological perspective. It focuses on the relation of utopian drives to the salvational doctrines of the great world historical religions and analyzes their place not only within theodicies, but as alternatives to established models of salvation. The specificities of utopian visions are analyzed in terms of both the emergence of what Karl Jasper termed "Axial Religions" and in their relation to the institutionalized models of social order of different civilizations.

"Time present and time past
Are both contained perhaps in time future,
And time future contained in time present,
If all time is eternally present,
All time is unredeemable"

T. S. Eliot

Introduction

The following papers attempt to explore the full sociological implications of the claim made by philosophers and religious thinkers, such as Martin Buber (1983) and Paul Tillich, that utopia is "rooted in the nature of man himself" (Tillich, 1965: 296). While the study of utopian movements has already been developed in a number of important directions, we proposed a somewhat different approach to its study.

The approach adopted was prompted by the following series of questions: What were the social dynamics underlying the vision of the ideal and perfect society posited in contrast to the fractured and imperfect reality of human existence? What united the different modes of utopian thought which extended not only back in time to Plato, but beyond the Western tradition to include Japanese, Chinese, and Indian thought (Braunthal, 1979; Nuita, 1971)? What, moreover is the relationship of utopias to millennialism? Is their difference simply semantic? Is one a static and the other an active vision (Shepperson, 1970: 45)? Is one an act of human will and the other of divine grace (Manuel, 1965: 70)? How are they to be understood in relation to one another, both within and beyond the Western tradition?

Consequently, the goal set by the contributors was two-fold. First, they set out to explore the very possibility of a comparative study of utopias. Was utopian thought and action limited to the Western, Judeo-Christian tradition, or perhaps to monotheistic religions? Or was it (or some equivalent) a phenomenon to be found in all social formations, including the more worldly
Confucian civilization of China and the more other-worldly and transcendent civilization of India?

The second, related question pertained to the role of utopian visions within societies. Was utopianism merely a literary genre “born”, as described by the Manuels, “of the crossing of a paradisiacal other-worldly belief of Judeo-Christian religion with the Hellenistic myth of an ideal city on earth” (Manuel, 1979: 15)? Or is it rather characteristic of some perduring forms of social thought and action? If the latter, how indeed are such diverse phenomena as the literary utopias of the 17th and 18th centuries and the utopian communities of the 19th and 20th centuries, in Europe, the United States, Latin America, and India to be understood (Plath, 1971)?

Truly enough, the Western utopian tradition was, after all, rooted in early Hellinistic images of the perfect city or a perfect past, as illustrated in Hesiod’s Works and Days. Of equal importance to the development of Western utopian thought have been the particular religious visions of both Judaism and Christianity with their stress on an other-worldly future, an Endzeit of “absolute perfection still to be experienced” (Manuel, 1979: 17). To these must be added the speculation of the early Church Fathers and Christian philosophers on the pre-lapsarian state of nature (Kateb, 1972: 6). These traditions were, however, the taproots of the Western intellectual and political tradition tout court. Their influence, therefore, can hardly be restricted to that of isolated visions over the course of Christian history.

Restricting utopian thought to literary images of an ideal order, thereby removing utopianism from the realm of social action and ensconcing it in the more esoteric arena of individual fantasy, is clearly a limited perspective. The very saliency of Jewish and Christian eschatology in informing social action throughout history belies any attempt to limit utopianism to a purely literary and individual phenomenon.

We would do well, therefore, to query if utopianism was not more along the lines developed by Karl Mannheim, a state of mind embodied in actual conduct seeking “to burst the bounds of an existent order” (1936: 192, 193). Such an interpretation would identify utopianism with a particular form of social movement orientated to the total transformation of the social order. Here too, however, difficulties arise. Such a perspective fails to encompass all aspects of the utopian vision. For the utopian drive or propensity embodies a “rage for order”, an “impetus to save the world from as much confusion and disorder as possible” (Davis, 1983: 369). As a “dream of order” whose “controlling value is harmony”, some vision of human felicity has been a persistent tradition in all the major civilizations (Kateb, 1968: 269). It has stood at the very core of some of the major political systems. In this sense, utopianism may be related to that search for a perfect political order expounded in such works as Plato’s Republic or Aristotle’s Politics. The Western political vision itself was an attempt “to abolish or regenerate history by the construction of a man-made cosmos organized in accordance with what is more permanent in man” (Gunnell, 1987: 15).